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Silly Social Science Scales: Embracing the Particular

Steven S. Taylor

Editor-in-Chief

For me, one of the great joys of being an academic is that a certain eccentricity is not only tolerated, but maybe even a little bit expected. It is, after all, my job to think about things that most people don't think about and to think about those things in a way that is different than how other people have thought about them. One of my peccadillos is a penchant for making up silly social science scales.

For example, I created the "Mudita – Schadenfreude" scale. Mudita is a Buddhist term for sympathetic joy, while schadenfreude refers to getting joy from the troubles of others. Thus it is a scale that assesses how you are feeling in relationship to your fellow humans – are you getting more joy from the successes or failures of others? I have also created the "Jazz Hands – Haka Hands" scale. Jazz hands are when you raise your hands up and shimmer them next to your smiling face. It is based in the work of legendary choreographer Bob Fosse, but has come to be an ironic gesture of fake excitement. In short, jazz hands are completely inauthentic. In contrast, Haka hands refers to the *wiri*, which is a trembling of the hands during the Maori's traditional war challenge (popularized these days by the New Zealand national rugby team, the All Blacks who perform it before every match). The energy in their trembling hands is completely authentic and connected to the very core of those performing the Haka. So the "Jazz Hands – Haka Hands" scale is a scale of embodied authenticity. Of course, neither scale is based in any sort of "good social science" work. They are more like small pieces of art done in a social science motif.

As an management scholar, when I see two scales I have an overwhelming desire to bring the two together and create a two-by-two matrix – which I have done below (including unexplained names for the four categories):

Mudita	Charlatans	Saints
	Pundits	Misanthropes
Schadenfreude	Jazz Hands	Haka Hands

As with any two-by-two, the primary result is the creation of categories, which can then be used to make sense of our world. Categories abound in the management world, from Myers-Briggs personality types to the Boston Consulting Group's "Cash Cow / Star / Dog" matrix. I am guilty of adding to this, for example, with my somewhat tongue-in-cheek "Plants / Acid Trip / Visit to Mars" matrix (Taylor, 2003). All of this categorization is for good reason – as humans we like categories. Categories are short cuts that allow

us to quickly make sense of our world and not have to think a lot more about it. If I know someone is an introvert rather than an extrovert I can immediately tell myself a story about why they did what they did and I don't need to spend any more time with that. Our natural tendency is to preserve energy (what Kahneman refers to as our natural laziness) and it takes less energy to work from pre-existing categories than it does to keep engaging with the evidence of our senses (Kahneman, 2011).

In a very real way, social science categories are a giant leap forward from categories based on prejudice, cultural tradition, and our own narrow experience of the world. But they are nonetheless, still categories and as such they provide an easy way to not engage with the particular, the individual case. They provide a way to easily stop paying attention to the evidence of our senses (Springborg, 2010, 2012) and they are a way of not "not knowing" (Berthoin Antal, 2013). In short, they are antithetical to artfulness (Taylor, 2013).

That is not to say that the research process that created the categories wasn't artful. Indeed, there are many similarities between the process of doing research and the process of making art (e.g. Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 1998; Sullivan, 2005). What I am trying to point out is that most of the products of social science research – the mid-level theories, the social science instruments, the two-by-two matrixes – give us a very different way of understanding our world than art does. Where art asks us to engage with the particular, to learn from the individual, to stay with the evidence of our senses and be willing to not know; the social science products provide us with ways to stereotype the individual as a member of a class, and then work from our own mental model of that class rather than with the particularity of the individual.

Of course there are social science products that work much more like art such as the thick description (Geertz, 1973) of a good ethnography and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). But they exist largely on the margins of the social science world. I note that there is a large consulting business that is grounded in administering various social science instruments and working with the results with people. There isn't a similar business based in asking people to read ethnographies or portraits (there are some individual consultants who do work with actual works of art, but they are a drop in the bucket in comparison).

You might argue that the case method of business teaching dwells with the particular. The fundamental problem with a lot of case study teaching that I see is that it tends to move to a pre-defined particular answer (watching a skilled case study teacher generate the solution from the discussion can be a work of art in itself). This is in contrast to the way art starts from the particular and moves to a wide variety of understandings. The case study is trying to have convergent generalizability (one answer that everyone reaches) which is also the aim for most social science, while art works with divergent generalizability (Taylor, 2004) and a multiplicity of understanding.

This idea of divergent generalizability – the way each of us can connect to a piece of art and take away our own lesson of what it means for us is at the heart of the difference between art and social science. It is not just about how we interact with works of art, but also how we go about making art and in this way it contrasts with how we are trained to go about doing social science. The artist is trained to stay with their senses, to not know and to hold any conceptions they have very lightly (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Shreidan, 2007). They work with their embodied sensemaking, which is usually not articulated and is seldom cognitive. As Louis Armstrong famously said, "if you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know." The artist recognizes that it is the felt, embodied knowing that matters to them and translating that into cognitive, intellectually articulated knowing is not what really matters (admittedly the art speak of artist statements in grants, galleries, and museums may suggest this is different for artists these days). In contrast the social scientist must translate what they know into

intellectual knowing, into theory, into categories in order to have legitimacy in the academic domain.

Behind or perhaps underneath the approach of the social sciences is the assumption that we can change ourselves and our world through better decision making based in a deeper, richer cognitive understanding of the world. It is a belief that owes much to a Cartesian mind-body dualism and belief in the primacy of the mind and rational thought. The artistic approach is based in more holistic understanding of humans – we are our bodies and the mind is part of that. We understand and act with our whole selves and often that acting is not based in any sort of cognitive or rational thinking process. The arts embrace this and teach a way of being – staying with your senses and not knowing – that takes advantage of the perceptive, emotional, and sensemaking powers of the human being.

I think that there is great power in the particular and in an artful approach to the particular based in staying with your senses and not knowing. For me, it is the great lesson that the arts have to offer the social sciences – that we can embrace subjectivity, contextuality and all the peculiarities of the particular and in doing so, offer insights that are deeper, more universal and more useful than any social science scale, silly or not.

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